# Russia’s Cheapest Front: Germany’s Electoral Battlefield

*Domestic Fragmentation, Russian Hybrid Warfare, and NATO’s Defense Build-up in a Fractured Berlin*

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## Abstract

This report examines how Russia’s hybrid interference strategy targets Germany’s September 2026 elections within the context of the country’s role as the foundation of NATO’s European defense build-up. Drawing on documented interference campaigns, AfD electoral momentum, and the structural constraints facing German rearmament, the analysis demonstrates that Moscow need not capture German government to achieve strategic advantage: fragmentation alone, exploited through information operations and amplified by the Kremlin’s minimal expenditure, can paralyze Berlin’s military production and financial commitments to Ukraine. The report traces the firewall strategy’s arithmetic paradox, the constitutional institutions now weaponized against themselves, and the timing asymmetry between Germany’s multi-year defense contracts and successive electoral cycles. It further contextualizes American ambivalence toward European firewall strategies and the implications of sustained American political endorsement of anti-NATO parties. The report concludes that NATO’s most penetrable frontier is political rather than geographical, and that protecting it requires consensus mechanisms resilient across electoral discontinuity—a requirement most democracies do not satisfy.

**Keywords:** AfD, Alternative for Germany, Berlin Government, Bundesrat, Defense Spending, Disinformation, Electoral Interference, European Defense, European Security, Firewall Strategy, Friedrich Merz, Germany, Hybrid Warfare, Information Operations, Military Build-up, NATO Burden-Sharing, NATO Europe, Political Fragmentation, Russia, Russian Interference, Saxony-Anhalt, September Elections

**Category:** Analysis

## 1. Introduction: The Electoral Advantage

The Kremlin does not need the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) to govern to achieve the victory it seeks in Germany. It needs only the party’s electoral strength to trap exhausted incumbents in increasingly brittle exclusion coalitions that struggle to sustain rearmament, support for Ukraine, and Germany’s long-term security commitments.

In September, Germany’s electoral battlefield may prove to be one of Russia’s least expensive fronts for challenging NATO. Because Europe’s defense build-up runs through German budgets, industry, and political will, a paralyzed Berlin would allow the Kremlin to weaken the cohesion and military capacity of NATO’s European pillar without deploying a single soldier.

> *“Moscow need not capture German government to achieve strategic advantage: fragmentation alone can paralyze Berlin’s military production and financial commitments to Ukraine.”*

## 2. The Electoral Landscape

Saxony-Anhalt votes first, on September 6, with the AfD polling at 41 percent, roughly 17 points ahead of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Berlin follows on September 20, where the party is running either first or second, depending on the poll. Mecklenburg-Vorpommern votes the same day, with the AfD at 36 percent.

Russia's strategic opportunity lies in Germany's political and economic vulnerabilities, which are largely domestic in origin and predate the current campaign. Cheap Russian gas underpinned the German industrial model for decades. That dependence was a German choice. Successive governments deepened it through the Nord Stream pipelines, treating commercial integration as a security strategy rather than a potential vulnerability the Kremlin might someday choose to leverage.

The nuclear phase-out, completed in April 2023, removed an alternative just as gas supply became a liability. The war and the sanctions regime severed the arrangement, and the largest economy in Europe contracted in both 2023 and 2024. Migration compounded the strain. Repeated failures to control irregular entry handed the AfD its most reliable issue. Disputes over integration, national identity, and the pace of social change gave it a second. Coalition fatigue completed the picture.

> *"Russian operations did not author German discontent. Each grievance exploited by the AfD carries its own internal political logic, even as Moscow clearly recognizes the opening and works to widen it."*

## 3. Documented Interference and Hybrid Warfare

German authorities have documented sustained election interference. The Foreign Office summoned Russia's ambassador in December 2025, stating that the GRU-linked Storm-1516 operation had sought to influence and destabilize the February 2025 federal election. Researchers identified more than 700 fake social media accounts in that campaign's final week, spreading fabricated scandals about Friedrich Merz and then vice-chancellor and Green chancellor candidate Robert Habeck.

An unattributed attack has also marked the campaign. Last week, a bus driver at Leipzig/Halle airport knocked an explosive-laden drone out of the air beside a Ukrainian Antonov cargo aircraft. Federal prosecutors described the incident as a serious attack on Germany's external and internal security. Investigators suspect Russian hybrid warfare, though Moscow denies involvement and no attribution has been proven.

The party affinity is separately documented: the AfD opposes arms deliveries to Kyiv, and German prosecutors have investigated AfD-linked figures over alleged payments from the pro-Russian Voice of Europe network.

## 4. The Firewall's Impossible Arithmetic

Eastern Germany supplies the structural tinder. Three decades after reunification, the region combines weaker wages, demographic decline, and thinner party organizations with a political memory less anchored in Atlanticism. In Saxony-Anhalt, the AfD's lead candidate Ulrich Siegmund challenges incumbent premier Sven Schulze, whose CDU has fallen to roughly 24 percent.

But the Kremlin's deeper return on investment lies in the arithmetic the party's strength imposes on everyone else. Every point the AfD gains shrinks the space in which pro-Ukraine majorities can form, regardless of what voters intended. The mechanism is already visible at federal level. Merz governs through a grand coalition with the Social Democrats that commands little enthusiasm.

That pressure is now surfacing inside the CDU itself. In July, Saxony's CDU premier Michael Kretschmer called for ending the Brandmauer, the firewall barring cooperation with the AfD. Merz rebuffed him, insisting that the far right remains the CDU's main opponent. Both men respond rationally to an impossible strategic position: upholding the firewall forces the CDU into coalitions with a weakened left, producing lowest-common-denominator governments that feed the very disillusion on which the AfD capitalizes.

## 5. Germany's Defense Build-up at Risk

September's votes carry alliance-wide weight because Berlin has become the load-bearing structure of European defense. The 2026 defense budget allocates roughly $125 billion to the military, combining about $95 billion from the core budget with additional spending financed through the $115 billion Zeitenwende Sondervermögen (special fund). Government planning charts a path toward 3.5 percent of GDP for defense by 2029, with the core budget projected to reach $177 billion by 2028.

The timetable, however, sharpens political exposure. The special fund will be exhausted by the end of 2027, leaving the steepest planned increases in the future—between 2028 and 2030, exactly when the next federal election will redistribute power. German rearmament is a promise made by this parliament that only the next one can keep.

> *"German rearmament is a promise made by this parliament that only the next one can keep, at exactly the moment when an AfD-strengthened Bundestag will block constitutional amendments."*

Electoral arithmetic has constrained that promise once already. In March 2025, Merz secured a constitutional exemption allowing defense spending to bypass the debt brake only by pushing the measure through the outgoing Bundestag. The incoming chamber contained an AfD and Left Party minority large enough to block constitutional amendments. The legal foundation of German rearmament thus rests on a maneuver executed days before the electoral door closed. Future adjustments are likely to face an even harder chamber.

## 6. Ukraine's Dependence on German Supplies

The implications go beyond Germany. Ukraine's war effort now depends on this trajectory. Following Washington's reduction in military assistance, Germany became Kyiv's largest military donor, with support of around 13.2 billion euros planned for 2026, including Patriot air defense systems, artillery, and drones.

German industry anchors the wider European effort through Rheinmetall's expanding ammunition plants and the F-35 procurement sustaining NATO's nuclear mission. Alliance planning also treats the country as the rear-area hub through which reinforcements would flow to the eastern flank in a crisis.

## 7. NATO's Burden-Sharing Equation

An AfD-led government in Saxony-Anhalt would therefore matter beyond state politics. It would hold votes in the Bundesrat, extend patronage over administration and police, and normalize the party before the 2029 federal contest. More importantly, the Zeitenwende's multi-year contracts require stable majorities across multiple electoral cycles. The AfD rejects that strategic rearmament consensus outright.

Germany's build-up has become the core of NATO's burden-sharing bargain. At the 2025 Hague summit, allies pledged five percent of GDP for defense and related infrastructure, a target designed to let Washington pivot toward the Indo-Pacific. The European pillar Washington demands therefore runs through German fiscal and political choices. Poland and the Baltic states spend heavily but lack Germany's industrial depth and financial capacity. France carries nuclear weight yet faces its own fiscal constraints.

## 8. Constitutional Defenses Weaponized

Germany's constitutional order was designed for precisely this threat, and its instruments are failing the test. The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution designated the AfD a confirmed right-wing extremist organization in May 2025. It now faces a public more willing to support the AfD than any other party.

In February this year, the Cologne Administrative Court granted the party an injunction suspending that designation pending final judgment. AfD leaders Alice Weidel and Tino Chrupalla celebrated a victory for democratic fairness, timed months before the eastern elections.

However, each trajectory feeds the Kremlin's narrative machine. A ban application would let Moscow's outlets present Germany as a managed democracy silencing its largest opposition party. A failed or abandoned application would certify the AfD as constitutionally sound, collapsing the rationale for exclusion. The February injunction reveals a third cost. Courts may disarm the intelligence services mid-campaign, leaving the state's assessment discredited and the party emboldened.

> *"Germany's constitutional order's very defense mechanisms have become part of the political battlefield."*

## 9. The Asymmetry Favors Moscow

The structural direction appears to point one way. The most plausible outcome is that September's contest leaves German incumbents weaker, coalition-building harder, and the firewall more fragile and expensive to maintain. The 2029 federal election may prove the decisive iteration of the same test, with the AfD entering from a higher base.

The asymmetry favors Moscow. Russia loses little by waiting for democratic fragmentation to deepen, while Germany and its allies must sustain consensus across successive cycles. The defenders of the Zeitenwende must prevail repeatedly; Moscow may need to succeed only once.

NATO has spent decades fortifying the frontiers it can see. Germany's September test will offer an early indication of whether its political frontier proves equally resilient. If Germany's political center proves unable to sustain rearmament over time, NATO's burden-sharing strategy may face constraints that no amount of military planning can solve.

**About the Author:** Thomas O. Falk is a London-based journalist and analyst focused on transatlantic relations, US affairs, and European security. With a background in political reporting and strategic analysis, he draws on in-depth research, historical insight, and on-the-ground developments to explore the forces shaping today's geopolitical landscape. View more reporting by this author →

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